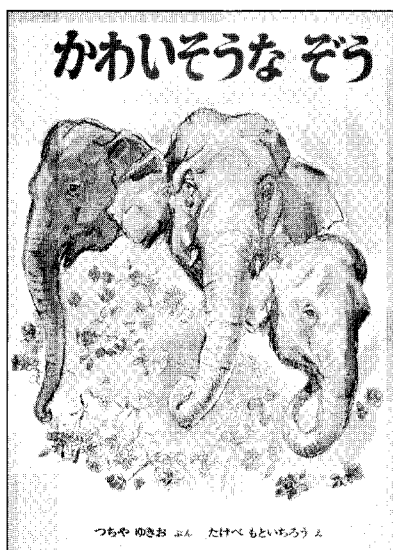


# HISTORY INTO MYTH

## The Anatomy of a Picture Book

*Ariko Kawabata and Kay E. Vandergrift*



Cover for the picture book version of Yukio Tsuchiya's *Kawaisouna Zo* (Poor elephants; 1951; Tokyo: Kinnohoshi-sha, 1970). Illustrated by Motoichiro Takebe.

Historical fiction, especially historical fiction for children, often sacrifices factual accuracy to tell a more compelling story. In many instances, these stories are so repeatedly and powerfully told that they become mythic in nature. Subsequently, the myths associated with past events replace facts in the popular understanding of history. To illustrate, we will examine the history of one picture book about World War II that has enjoyed a long success, first in Japan and, more recently, in the US. From our differing perspectives as educators and citizens of these two countries, we consider the political history, the factual accuracy, and the literary qualities of both the Japanese and the American versions of Yukio Tsuchiya's *Kawaisouna Zo* (Poor elephants; 1951; Tokyo: Kinnohoshi-sha, 1970) or *Faithful Elephants* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

In Japan, everyone knows the story of the elephants that were starved to death in Ueno Zoo during World War II. It is so popular a theme for antiwar stories that the elephants have become symbolic of all innocent victims of war. Now, many years after the war, their deaths have become a kind of myth in which the elephants symbolize the weak who are oppressed under the tyrannous powers of those who wage war. In spite of the persistence and the popularity of the myth, the actual events upon which the story is based are clouded in mystery.

An example of this mythification is seen in the work of Haruki Murakami, currently one of the most popular writers in Japan. Murakami uses the legend of animal killing during wartime in his recent work *Nejimaki-Dori Chronicle* (The chronicle of the wind-up bird; Tokyo: Shincho-Sha, 1994–95). Although he locates this episode in Manchuria and the elephants' lives are spared in this case, the author's intention is clear. The elephants symbolize the victims of unreasonable violence. We may correctly call this group of proliferating stories "animal-slaughter myths."

*Kawaisouna Zo*<sup>1</sup> is a relatively early version and the most famous of World War II animal-slaughter myths. This story won two awards as an excellent antiwar picture book for children<sup>2</sup> and was included in the elementary school textbook for second grade pupils. The fame of the book depends, to some extent, on its soft-touched illustrations done by Motoichiro Takebe for the 1970 edition. Telling very young children about the cruel reality of war is always a difficult task, but this book had been said to accomplish it quite well.

### Myth versus History

In studying the anatomy of this picture book, it is important to separate the historical event from the stories created to memorialize that event. It may be true that the actual slaughter of the animals was justified as a means of stirring the Japanese people to support the war effort. Nonetheless, by the time the story was published, especially in the picture book version, it was seen more as an antiwar story. As we move further in time from the war, the emphasis against cruelty to animals has become as strong as the antiwar message.

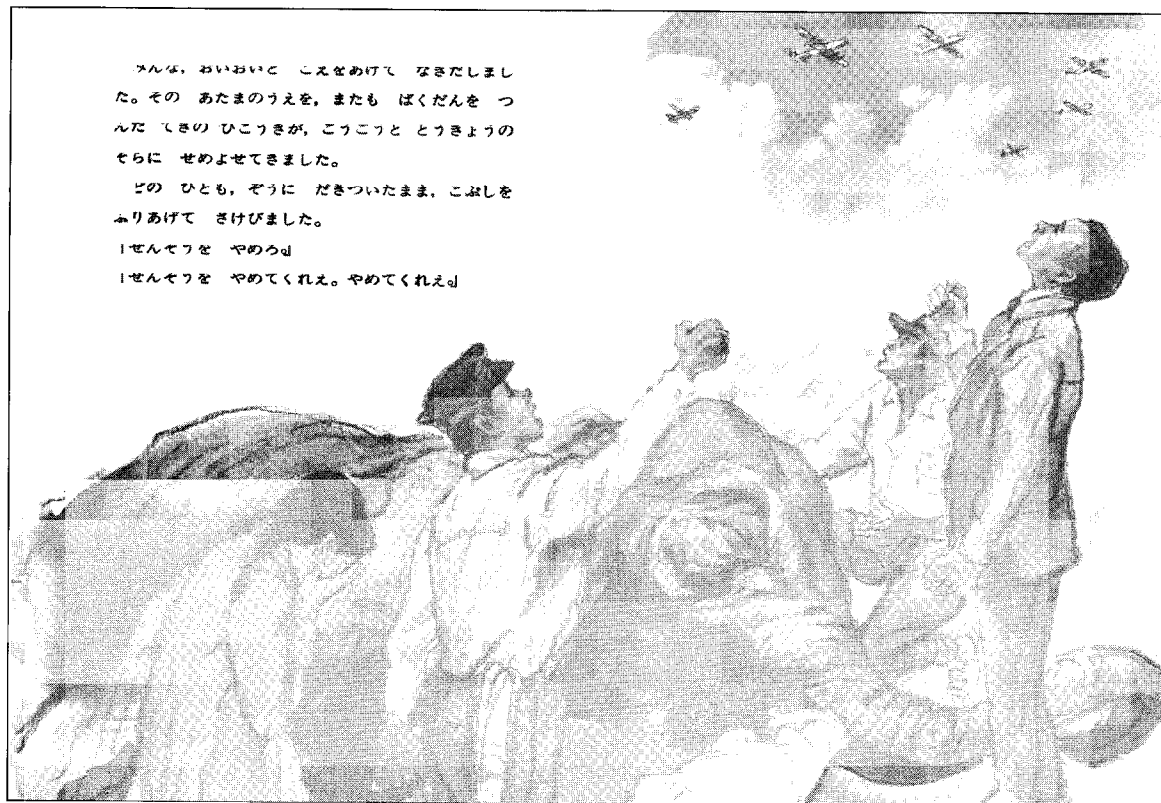
In 1981, *Kawaisouna Zo*, as well as the other animal-slaughter myths, was severely criticized by Ushio Hasegawa, a leading children's literature critic in Japan, who argued that Tsuchiya not only had distorted the historical facts to serve his pur-

pose, but also had disguised the true intentions of the authorities who ordered the killing.<sup>3</sup> According to Hasegawa, the elephants in Ueno Zoo were not killed for the sake of people's safety, as in the legend, but as a part of the army's propaganda effort to encourage people to prepare for the worst and, more importantly, to encourage their (especially children's) hatred of the enemy. His argument is founded on closely examined historical facts. However, according to the picture book, dangerous beasts in Ueno Zoo were killed in 1943 because

the war had become more and more severe. Bombs were dropped on Tokyo every day and night, like falling rain. What would happen if bombs hit the zoo? If the cages were broken and dangerous animals escaped to run wild through the city, it would be terrible! (14)

Hasegawa points out that in 1943 no bombs were dropped on Tokyo. It was not until after November 1944 that "every day and night" Tokyo was under attack. So, in 1943, there was no need to kill the children's favorite elephants or any other animals. What is true, however, is that the Japanese people were not taking the army's warning about possible air raids seriously. Therefore, the government faced a serious dilemma. On the one hand, they had to make people ready for the coming invasion by the enemy; but, on the other, they had to conceal information on the lost battles in the southern areas. In other words, the animal slaughter was a governmental strategy to resolve this predicament. By killing animals, the army could communicate both the urgency of the war and the hatefulness of the enemy. Furthermore, by focusing on the "poor elephants," it could divert attention from its failure to defend the land.

The strategy was a great success. According to a journal written by Saburo Fukuda, vice director of Ueno Zoo at that time (the director was serving on the war front), a grand memorial service was held in the zoo for the animals that sacrificed



Takebe's illustration of enemy planes flying over the bodies of the elephants. For Yukio Tsuchiya's *Kawaisouna Zo* (Poor elephants; 1951; Tokyo: Kinnohoshi-sha, 1970).

their lives for the sake of *amor patriae*,<sup>4</sup> and newspaper reports stirred up warlike feelings. Children wrote many letters to the zoo, expressing their hatred toward the enemy countries that, they believed, caused the death of those animals. In fact, at that time, the elephants were still alive and awaiting their slow death, although few but the zookeepers knew this.

The greatest deception in *Kawaisouna Zo*, argues Hasegawa, is that it describes the slaughter as a humane act protecting people from danger. In reality, those who gave the orders for the killing of the animals were the very supporters and promoters of the war—those who began the war. In the story, when the keepers cried in protest against those who killed the elephants, the narrator says: “the zoo keepers raised their fists to the sky and implored ‘Stop the war!’” (31–32). The illustration inaccurately

depicts enemy planes flying over the dead bodies of the elephants. Young readers might easily misunderstand and erroneously conclude those airplanes were to be blamed for the actual event.

It appears that the author lacked a true recognition of the process, the true intention, and the responsibility of those who supported the imperialistic ideology and caused the war. Without such recognition, Hasegawa argues, there never is a true protest against war. By focusing on the “poorness” of the elephants, the book may cause children to shed tears, but it cannot have “a fundamental impact on the young readers’ view on wars.”

As a counterargument to this article, Tsuchiya answered that he had changed the historical facts for the sake of the book’s artistry and as a way to enhance its appeal to young readers. Hasegawa found fault with this attitude and pointed out that

Tsuchiya never really recognized what the problem was.<sup>5</sup> Born in 1936, Hasegawa admitted he himself was patriotic as a boy. His criticism was based on bitter self-reproach. But Tsuchiya, already a children's author during the war, had produced a mass of works designed to foster warlike feelings among children. It seems that Hasegawa would not allow Tsuchiya to change directions without recognizing his own responsibility.

Inspired by Hasegawa's article, NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) researched into this matter, proved Hasegawa's claims, and produced the "Soshite Tonky mo Shinda" (And Tonky died too) broadcast on 13 August 1982, and a documentary picture book of the same title.<sup>6</sup> Although this version of the story is far more accurate historically, it lacks the poetic beauty of the language of *Kawaisouna Zo* and has never achieved the popularity of the Tsuchiya version.

Thus, in Japan *Kawaisouna Zo* is no longer perceived as a factual account of events. But myth is much stronger and longer lasting than facts. In spite of the disputes and its removal from the school curriculum in Japan, many copies of *Kawaisouna Zo* are still piled high in Japanese bookshops, and public libraries still recommend this book. The Tonky version appears to be closer to the truth, but what remains in the minds of readers is the powerful and simple symbolism of the myth.

### The American Version: Cultural Gaps?

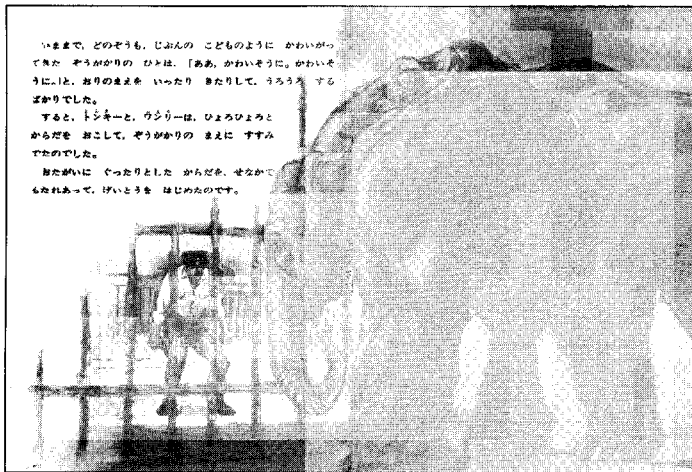
*Kawaisouna Zo* was translated into English<sup>7</sup> by Tomoko Tsuchiya Dykes and published in the US by Houghton Mifflin in 1988 as *Faithful Elephants*, subtitled "A True Story of Animals, People and War" that would "leave no reader unmoved" (book jacket). It was also released in paperback in 1997. One might wonder why it was represented as a "true story," although it had been severely criticized in Japan for its inaccuracies.<sup>8</sup>

US reviews, in general, seem to be favorable to this picture book; and none of the reviewers appears to be aware of the heated controversy surrounding this story in Japan. Most American critics seem to accept the subtitle's claim that *Faithful Elephants* is indeed "A True [emphasis ours] Story of Animals, People and War." This may be indicative of a larger problem when books cross language and cultural borders. There is no question that this book is a powerful literary composition, often recommended on lists of picture books for older readers. Literary quality should be of primary importance in selecting books to be translated, and it may be unrealistic to expect publishers to track publishing histories. It does seem strange, however, for a controversy of this magnitude not to come to light when an edition of a translation is undertaken.

This translation was done by the author's daughter, and we can only surmise that she wanted to honor her father's work without any indication of the criticisms against it. It is also interesting to



Ted Lewin's cover art for Yukio Tsuchiya's *Faithful Elephants* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).



Takebe's depiction of the suffering elephants is subdued, while Lewin's is more realistic.

note that Japanese radio and television commentator Chieko Akiyama, in the introduction, reports reading the story on radio and TV every year for the past twenty-two years (as of 1988). Although this commentator writes that "The biggest gift adults can give to children is to make public the complete history of and different viewpoints about war...", she obviously did not consider it important to make public the complete history of this book.

There are a number of interesting differences between the Japanese and the US versions of the story and also between our perceptions as writers of this article because of our respective cultural backgrounds. Although the translation appears to be a very accurate one, there are at least two important differences. The first concerns historical accuracy. The English text clearly states that the animals were killed "by command of the army." The Japanese version carefully avoids assigning specific responsibility.<sup>9</sup> The more obvious difference is in the title. The literal translation of *Kawaisouna Zo* is "The Pitiful Elephants," not "Faithful Elephants." This change shifts the perspective from sympathy to admiration. As we explored this distinction, we also discovered



another, more subtle, one. Many American readers respond most strongly to the cruelty of starvation as the cause of the elephants' slow death, while Japanese readers are affected more by the lingering pitiful state of the dying innocents themselves. In both cases, the emotional response to the animals causes the antiwar motif to recede or totally disappear. These are important distinctions, as they change the reader's relationship with the text.

The two illustrators also seem to "look" at the events of the story from different perspectives. In the Japanese book, most of Takebe's illustrations, both the people and the animals are seen from behind, looking away from the audience. In the

American version, Ted Lewin's pictures tend to "look" into the eyes of the reader. The "softer," more subdued quality of the Japanese art also seems to create greater "distancing." Although Lewin's illustrations are sensitive and somewhat impressionistic, they are more realistic than Takebe's. While Americans often comment positively on realistic images, many Japanese readers report being discomfited by too much realism in picture book illustration, tending to prefer more softly focused, vague images that hint rather than declare.

There are a number of specific differences between the Takebe and the Lewin illustrations. Some are just incidental; others may significantly influence the meaning that is conveyed. For instance, the zoo's original monument to the slaughtered animals is pictured by Takebe; Lewin illustrates the new monument built in 1975, after the publication of the 1970 edition of the Japanese book. Other differences may be more problematic. Lewin's opening scene foregrounds one kimono-clad figure among the zoo visitors in more modern (European) dress, and he exaggerates the facial features of those visitors. All this may be an attempt to emphasize the setting for US children. Here we must identify cultural differences in our perceptions. As a test we compared our own reactions. Aiko questioned the appropriateness of the exaggerated Asian racial features; Kay did not see that at all. Another of Aiko's concerns, unnoticed by Kay, is the depiction of the zookeepers' uniforms, drawn in a militaristic style that is historically inaccurate and inappropriate for contemporary civil servants as well.

Comments from American critics provide clues to some of the problems associated with this book. For example, when Christina L. Olson states that "the High Moral Purpose here must be interpreted as having more to do with the heartlessness of the zookeepers than the cruelty of war,"<sup>10</sup> she shares the opinion of modern young readers in both Japan and the US. Olson says that "it is also somehow churlish

to implicate children in the stupidities of adults," but, according to Hasegawa, the actual intent of the killing of the animals was to promote the war among children. In a sense, Tsuchiya did the same thing the Japanese government did, using the pitiful state of the animals to exploit children. Maybe it is true when Olson says that "No amount of rhetorical conceit will make *Faithful Elephants* any more than a book that demonstrates immoral cruelty to animals." It is, in a sense, no longer an antiwar book but a book about the pitiful fate of animals.


As indicated earlier, the most puzzling thing for American readers about the animal slaughter seems to be the way the elephants were killed. For example, Zena Sutherland says that "There is no explanation of why the slow death was chosen rather than shooting."<sup>11</sup> The same question, also asked by Betsy Hearne,<sup>12</sup> is now being raised by contemporary Japanese as well. This is another example of how far



Lewin emphasizes the Japanese setting for US children through a kimono-clad figure and exaggerated Asian racial features.

we are from wartime experiences. The zoo did possess two guns, but it was the opinion at the time that guns should not be used because the sound of gunfire might cause panic. In addition, there was a severe shortage of ammunition; even the iron railings of the zoo were commandeered by the army to use in making bullets. Another factor may have been location. Ueno Zoo is very near the Emperor's Palace. At Higashiyama Zoo, located in the suburbs, officials shot some dangerous animals. But, in answer to a question posed by Hearne, there never was a "social or religious taboo" in this matter.

Some critical comments reflect a cultural and information gap between the US and Japan. It is clear, however, that the gap in time since this book's original publication in Japan may be even more significant. Few readers today, either children or adults, truly comprehend the wartime atmosphere that pervaded Japan in the early 1940s, an ideological atmosphere in which the rule of authority dominated personal conscience. In order to achieve mutual and more accurate understanding, critics need a wider perspective and more open discussion.

To conclude, we return to the nature of all historical fiction for children. Let us recall the argument between Hasegawa and Tsuchiya: which should we choose, fact or artistry? Of course, fact has to be honored, but often myth has a stronger appeal. The power of those myths and readers' responses to them may skew the understanding of history. Therefore, we must strive for accuracy with artistry—at least with the kind of source notes that inform readers of the relationship of the artistic rendering to the actual events. Further, although more sharing across language and cultural boundaries is essential in our global society, we must more carefully consider the relationship between accuracy and artistry in selecting books for translation. This should not limit or restrict translations but rather enhance our appreciation of both history and myth as well as our understanding of other ways of life. 

1. He has revised the work many times since 1951, but the current picture book version, first published in 1970, is now in the 110th edition.

2. It was selected by the National School Association as a book for both "Required Reading" and "Basic Reading."

3. Ushio Hasegawa, "Zo mo Kawaiou: Moju Gyakusatsu Shinwa Hihan" (The elephants are also to be pitied: A criticism of the myth of animal slaughter), *Kikan Jidoubungaku Hihyo* (Children's literature criticism quarterly), Charter Issue (Sept. 1981): 4–16.

4. Saburo Fukuda, *Jitsuroku Ueno Dobutsuen* (The journal of Ueno Zoo; Tokyo: Mainichi-Shinbun-Sha, 1968).

5. Ushio Hasegawa, *Nihon no Senso Jidoubungaku* (Children's literature about war in Japan; Tokyo: Kyuzan-sha, 1995), 107.

6. Mamoru Tanabe, *Soshite Tonky mo Shinda* (And Tonky died too; Tokyo: Kokudoshu, 1982).

7. There was an earlier English translation in 1979, entitled *Poor Elephants*, issued by Kinnohoshi-sha as a volunteer publication. This edition was made at the request of the Japanese National Council of Day Nurseries, a government affiliate, for the International Year of the Child. One of the co-translators was Tomoko Tsuchiya Dykes, the daughter of the author.

8. In a telephone conversation on 7 August, 1997, Jennifer Roberts of Houghton Mifflin indicated she had no knowledge of this previous history in Japan.

9. In 1983, another version of the rationale behind the animal slaughter was advanced: to celebrate its centenary, Ueno Zoo published *The Hundred Years History of Ueno Zoo*, which denies that the killing was ordered by the army, stating that it was Shigeo Odachi, mayor of Tokyo-to, who issued the order. This argument, if true, might subvert not only Hasegawa's argument but all the stories about the elephants.

10. Christina L. Olson, review of *Faithful Elephants*, *School Library Journal* 35 (Nov. 1988): 114.

11. Zena Sutherland, review of *Faithful Elephants*, *Bulletin of Children's Books* 42 (Nov. 1988): 86–87.

12. Betsy Hearne, "Coming to the States: Reviewing Books from Abroad," *Horn Book* 67 (Sept./Oct. 1991): 562–67.

---

Ariko Kawabata is an assistant professor of English literature at Aichi Prefectural University in Nagoya-city, Japan, and Kay Vandergrift is professor at the School of Communication Information and Library Studies, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA. Vandergrift gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Ryoko Toyama, director of the New Brunswick Libraries, Rutgers University.